



Testimony of

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**Before the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security**

Hearing on

**Addressing the Immigration Status of Illegal Immigrants Brought to the
United States as Children**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Lofgren, and members of the subcommittee. I am Dr. Barrett Duke, vice president for public policy and research for the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission. As you are aware, the Southern Baptist Convention is the nation's largest non-Catholic denomination, with nearly 16 million members worshipping in more than 46,000 autonomous local congregations. The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission is the official Southern Baptist entity charged by the Southern Baptist Convention to speak to our nation's moral, cultural, and religious liberty matters. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the subcommittee this afternoon from a faith-based perspective on the subject of children who were brought here by their parents contrary to our nation's immigration laws.

The subcommittee is right to view this group of undocumented immigrants differently from those who came here as adults. These are people who did not make a conscious decision to break the nation's immigration laws. They were brought here as minors. This is the only life they know. It is likely that they identify more with this country and its culture than they do with the country and culture from which their parents brought them. This is their home.

Our country should not hold these children accountable for the choices their parents made. Would anyone in this room want to or expect to be held accountable for decisions their parents made? I think not. Such class distinctions are abhorrent to us as Americans. Many of our forebears came to this land to escape such types of social stratification. In this land, every person is to be judged by his or her own character and accomplishments, not those of his ancestors or her parents. God, Himself, has pledged such an approach to individual accountability. In the Hebrew Scriptures, held by me and billions of others as God's revealed will, the prophet Ezekiel, speaking God's pronouncement, declared, "A son won't suffer punishment for a father's iniquity, and a father won't suffer punishment for the son's iniquity" (Ezekiel 18:20). If God will not hold children accountable for the sins of their parents, certainly we should not either.

As an evangelical Christian, I rely heavily on the teachings of the Bible to help me develop my thoughts about all aspects of life, my own and my nation's. I fully support the biblical teaching of the divine origin and role of government as laid out in such passages as Romans 13:1-5. However, that passage does not give government the freedom to act in any way it chooses. It states that God's design for government is to punish bad behavior and to reward good behavior. Surely, we would all agree that this is a fundamental purpose of government.

While every person brought to this country illegally as a minor should not qualify for special consideration by this subcommittee, many certainly should. Those who are of good moral character and demonstrate a desire to make their own way through life should be given a chance to come out of the shadows and join in the full life and vitality of our nation. We should reward their good behavior. This is a group of people who embody many of the characteristics that we value in Americans. This is the spirit our nation celebrates. We should celebrate that spirit in these young men and women, as well, and provide a way forward for them.

As you consider legislation to assist these children of undocumented immigrants to fully prepare for full and productive lives in this nation, here are some things I would urge you to consider. First, it is difficult to imagine how you can fully address their needs without also addressing the needs of the other

undocumented immigrants in our nation, including their parents. It is my hope and prayer that Congress will see this as one piece of a bigger plan that meets the principles of sound immigration reform. We *can* honor the rule of law, secure our borders, and chart a just and compassionate way forward for the millions of other undocumented immigrants living peacefully and productively in our midst.

Second, some parameters seem to be in order. These young women and men should be able to prove they were minors when they were brought here, and they should have been here for some period of time prior to the enactment of your legislation so that we make sure we don't encourage a rush into the country by parents hoping to take advantage of this country's good will. They should demonstrate that they are young men and women of strong moral character, with a commitment to their futures. Their legal records and a commitment to pursue some form of higher education, possibly college or technical school, or some form of service to their country, like joining the armed services, should be a sufficient guide for that. As a sign of their good faith commitment to pursue these goals, they should have successfully completed high school or passed the GED exam. They should be granted a provisional legal status that protects them from deportation while they are in higher education or some other acceptable activity. Following successful completion of their tracks, they should be allowed to apply for a green card and eventually citizenship if they desire it.

As I said earlier, I think you must also consider the parents of these young people. They are likely still their principal supporters, especially of those who pursue an education track. I do not think that you can confer a legal status on their parents through this legislation. That should be part of the broader immigration reform that must be done. But, until you do that, you should do what you can to prevent the use of the children's records as a means to identify their parents for deportation. A simple solution might be to seal that part of the children's records from governmental inquiry.

There is also the important matter of cost for those who pursue higher education. I know Congress is debating that issue for our nation's college students now. You know how much college costs. We shouldn't make it impossible for these young, aspiring people to attain the goal we have held out to them. If we are serious about helping them to reach their full potential, and we should certainly be so, then we should do what we can to make it possible for them to obtain some form of financial assistance if they need it. The states should decide whether they can qualify for in-state tuition. But I would urge you to consider whether the federal government can help. Currently, non-citizens with proper documentation or who meet certain criteria can seek federal education funds, like refugees, asylees, victims of human-trafficking, and others. So, there is already somewhat of a precedent for this.

I thank the committee for your willingness to tackle this important matter. We are dealing with lives here, not only laws. Let justice be blind, but let her also be discerning. Their character and drive reveal that these young men and women under consideration represent some of the best of what we are looking for in our future citizenry. We should welcome them and encourage them, and do all we can to empower them to stand tall. As we honor them and their commitment, we say to a watching world, and likely, a watching citizenry, that this really is still a land of opportunity and promise.

That concludes my comments. I look forward to attempting to answer any questions you might have.